

Circular Practice

October 12, 2011

Tomorrow at dawn the rains retreat ends. Of course, here we don't have much rain during the retreat. But the retreat isn't all about rain. It's about living in one place, living together, and benefiting from the practice of living together.

The Buddha designed the monkhood so that monks would have time off by themselves, wandering around for part of the year, and then living together in one place for part of the year so as to get the advantage both of solitude and of living with admirable friends. And it's always good to reflect on why we need to live together as part of the training. When people get off on their own, they can get caught in really weird feedback loops. They go spinning off in one direction. They get focused on one thing, and they just get obsessed with it. So it's good to have people to get you out of those loops.

Of course, you want to look for the right people: people who actually have the right values, people who see the value of training the mind, the value of digging down into the mind and seeing why it's still causing itself suffering. Even though everything we do is aimed at happiness, we still suffer. And if we don't keep the question of suffering foremost in mind—and particularly the suffering the mind causes itself through its craving and clinging and ignorance—it's so easy to get pulled off into other interests. And the big issue you're responsible for gets abandoned.

So the reason we have a group of people here focused on the practice is to keep us from getting into the weird mind states that come when you're off living alone—and the weird mind states that come when you live in ordinary society. So as we practice, remember that we're depending on one another and we also want to be dependable *for* one another, to try to be a good example to others so they feel inspired to work on their minds. In this way, everybody benefits from living together.

Now, for some of us, there will be the opportunity in the next several months to go off and be alone, so you want to learn how to take advantage of that as well. You can put aside your ordinary responsibilities and look 100 percent at your own mind as you go through the day. Ajaan Fuang always said that it was good when you're living alone to act as if you're living with others, and when you're living with others, to act as if you're living alone. In other words, when you're alone, have a set schedule for yourself. Figure out a schedule that works with your bodily

rhythms and then stick to it. When you're with others, try to keep the conversations to a minimum.

There's a story in the Canon when the Buddha got exasperated with the monks in Kosambi. Maybe exasperated is too strong a word, but he realized that his staying there wasn't going to accomplish anything. The monks were split into two big factions, and no matter how hard he tried to get them to get back on peaceful terms, they said basically, "You stay out of this! You can just be the Buddha. We're the ones who will be responsible for this." So he left. He went into the forest and there he met three monks who were living together. He asked them how they divided up their time. Basically, once every five days they would meet and have Dhamma discussion well into the night. But the rest of the time, they hardly talked. Even when there were chores to be done, they would try to use hand signals so as not to disturb one another's peace. That's an ideal to keep in mind.

So the real test of your Dhamma practice is the ability to practice well when you're with others and when you're alone. There are difficulties in each and there are advantages to each, and you learn by dealing with those difficulties. So remember that both sides have their value.

One of the advantages of having a rains retreat that lasts three months is that it gives you an opportunity to ramp up your practice for a manageable amount of time. So look back on these three months now. What particular practices did you take on? Were you pushing yourself a little bit more than you normally do? By now, you should begin to see some of the advantages of that.

As Ajaan Mun told Ajahn Chah, we want to keep our practice in the shape of a circle. If you find that these practices help, there's nothing to stop you from continuing them all around the year, even after the rains retreat is over. After all, three months is just one one-quarter of the year. And if you ramp up your practice only during one three-month period out of each year, it's not the shape of a circle; it's just a little arc. It starts and it stops and it doesn't build up any momentum. What you want is a practice that goes around the year and builds up momentum like the particles in one of those big atom smashers. They route them around and around and around, and as they go around the particles build up more momentum and get a lot of power.

So look at the last three months and see what you've learned from the practice or practices you took on. See which ones you feel are worth carrying on with. Three months gives you time to test things out and see what's working, what's not working. And if it's working, don't give it up. Don't put it aside only to start up again next July. Keep it going throughout the year so that you can get the power

of one of those colliders. That's how you really take advantage of this time so that it's not just a ceremony. It's not just a custom. It's your laboratory for testing different practices and then taking on the ones that work—because the time of self-reliance keeps growing shorter and shorter all the time.

Death is approaching, so you want to have something positive to take in a good direction as you go forward. You want the momentum of a good practice. You want the momentum of a trained mind. That's the only thing that will keep you from getting smothered by aging, illness, and death.